

Phenomenological Approach to the Study of Religion: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract

The issue of methodological approach in the study of religion has remained an enigma to many scholars of science of religion (religionswissenschaft) for many centuries. This led to the formulation of many methods such as historical, philosophical, psychological, sociological, phenomenological and the rest in the bid to solving this problem. This paper therefore looks at one of these methods known as phenomenological approach to the study of religion from the historical perspective to ascertain the origin and development of the method. Phenomenological study of religion deals with a personal participation of a scholar in the religion he seeks to study in order to understand the essence (meaning) and manifestations of the religious phenomena of the particular religion. This he does through the grouping of the phenomena, the suspension of value judgment, which was previously held about that religion, and the taking of a neutral stance in order to understand what he is studying.

Introduction

Various study approaches have been recommended by scholars on the scientific study of religion (religionswissenschaft). Some of these approaches include the sociological, the phenomenological, the philosophical, the psychological, the historical and others. The issue of methodological approach in the study of religion has remained a thorny issue since no two methods are the same and no two scholars can approach the study from exactly the same viewpoint even when they are using the same method.

Smart (1973) in his *The Science of Religion and the Sociology of Knowledge: Some Methodological Questions*, has advocated a method he calls the “polymethodic approach” (p.9). He argues that this method is necessary because different disciplines are integrated.

Macquarrie (1997) on the other hand, has attributed various theories and methods of studying religion to the multiplicity of authors and definitions of religion. In his words “almost as many definitions and theories of religion exist as there are authors on subject” (p.1) He therefore presents three approaches which he says are generally taken by scholars in the study of religion namely “the historical, the phenomenological, and the behavioural or social-scientific”(p.1).

In this paper, we shall take a cursory look at the phenomenological approach to the study of religion, which some scholars believe is arguably the most influential approach to the study of religion in the twentieth century. This work shall examine the historical development of this method from its earliest exponents. It shall also consider the main distinctive features of this method and finally conclude with a critique of the method.

The Origin and Development of Phenomenology and Phenomenology of Religion as a Field of Study

In this work on the phenomenological approach to the study of religion, we shall first trace the origin and development of the term “Phenomenology”, before narrating the origin of phenomenology of religion

Johann Heinrich Lambert

The term “phenomenology” was first coined by the Swiss-German mathematician and philosopher Johann Heinrich Lambert in 1764 from two Greek words whose combined meaning was “the setting forth or articulation of what shows itself”. He used this term in his reference to “illusory nature of human experience in an attempt to develop a theory of knowledge that distinguished truth from error (Moreau, 2001: 248). This view of Lambert was written in the Part 4 of his *Neues Organon* published in 1764 wherein he calls it the “doctrine of appearances” (Lehmann, 1975:1226).

Immanuel Kant

Immanuel Kant, who was a contemporary of Lambert, also used the term twice wherein he laid the foundation for its development “when he distinguished things as they appear to us (which he called phenomena) from things as they really are (which he called noumena)” (Moreau, 2001: 249). Kant proposed that it is not possible to have a true and genuine knowledge of the transcendent (noumena) as a science but in the immanent (or phenomena) it is possible since this is a description of the structures of human experience. He therefore proposed phenomenology as an appropriate field of philosophical and scientific inquiry.

Georg W. F. Hegel

Another scholar who used the word phenomenology was Georg W. F. Hegel in his *Phenomenology of the Spirit* published in 1807. Reacting against Kant’s splitting of phenomena into *noumena* and phenomena he argued that instead of a split of phenomena of Kant, “phenomena were actual stages of knowledge progressing in evolutionary fashion from raw consciousness to absolute knowledge” (Moreau, 2001: 249). He explains further that “in phenomenology, the soul now raises itself by means of the negation of its corporeity into the purely ideal nature of self-identity. It becomes consciousness, ego, has being-for-self in the face of its other”. (Qtd in Petry, 1978: LXXI). To Hegel, phenomenology was the science by means of which we come to absolute knowledge through studying the ways our minds appear to us.

Edmund Husserl

1900s witnessed a series of publication and studies on phenomenology during which time a German group showed their insight into phenomenology. One of such great thinkers was the Austrian-born Philosopher Edmund Husserl, who “sought to give philosophical foundations to a generally intuitive non-empirical approach of phenomenological methodology” (Moreau, 2001: 250). One major factor that led Husserl into the formulation of his view on phenomenology was the reigning idea at that time that “science alone is the ultimate court of appeal” (Ekeke, 2006: 55). This means that scientific method has seen itself as the only method of achieving the truth and falsity of any issue. He was therefore reacting against the scientific methodology, which demands that life experiences be thrown to the mud for objective empiricism. Husserl counters this view by saying that life experiences should be recognized, rather than being hindrance, could be used as a means through which reality could be explored.

Lehmann (1975) in describing Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology explains that it deals mainly with “the correlation between knowledge and knowledge of objects” as its basic theme. Husserl

explains that phenomenology analyses the idea of “intentionality” and ‘material content’ systematically as various modifications of intentionality such as love, hatred etc, and also examines the various modes of presence of the object as intended in each act (Lehmann, 1975: 1226). Husserl as early as 1894 rejected “the modern reductive interpretation of intuition of reception of sensory data, and firmly asserts that our intuitive consciousness reaches out beyond sensory affections and grasps the intended object itself” (Qtd in Cobb-Stevens, 1991: 10).

Writing in his work “Psychological Studies in the Elements of Logic”, Husserl (1977) explains “...an intuition is a ‘setting before’ in an authentic sense, where the object is actually put before us in such a manner that the object is itself the topic of philosophical activity” (p.304). Husserl’s influence in this area was phenomenal as the term now refers not only to a descriptive methodology but also to the movement of phenomenological philosophy.

Due to Husserl’s influence, phenomenology came to refer to a method which is more complex and claims rather more for itself than did Chantepie’s mere cataloguing of facts. Husserl argued that the foundation of knowledge is consciousness. He recognized how easy it is for prior beliefs and interpretations to unconsciously influence one’s thinking. Husserl’s phenomenological method therefore sought to shelve all these presuppositions and interpretations. He introduced the word “eidetic vision” to the field of phenomenology in order to describe the ability to observe without prior beliefs and interpretations influencing understanding and perceptions (*Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*, 2007a:1).

Husserl’s other contribution to the field of phenomenology is the idea of the “*epoche*” which has to do with setting aside metaphysical questions and observing phenomena in and of themselves. In this conceptual contribution Husserl sought to place philosophy on a descriptive and scientific basis.

He introduced fundamental principles of phenomenological study, which Van der Leeuw used extensively in the phenomenology of religion. These are *epoche*- the suspension of value judgments, and the adoption of a neutral stance.

In his view on *epoche*, derived from the Greek verb *epecho* which means “I hold back”, he explains that a phenomenologist is concerned with consciousness and so it does not matter whether the object of thought is real or not so questions of ultimate truth in the study of phenomena must be suspended or bracketed to allow the scholar understand the religion being studied. This suspension of judgment or exclusion of presuppositions from one’s mind is what he called “methodological neutrality or objectivity”. It is the suspension or bracketing of all prior beliefs, commitments, and value judgments when the subject matter of religion is concerned (Barnes, 2001: 8). The phenomenologist simply observes, describes and reports the various religious phenomena being studied.

Another principle, which Husserl introduced, is the principle of “eidetic” vision. The word eidetic is from a Greek *eidos* which means “that which is seen”, thus form, shape, essence. Smart (1979) explains that eidetic vision is the capacity to grasp the essence of religious phenomena by means of empathy and intuition. This empathy, he further explains, is “a kind of warm distances”. To him the focus is on “seeing what the believer sees-trying to enter the thought-world of ... [religion], but not necessarily with any endorsement (or criticism)” (Smart, 1979: 8). From the above description, it can be seen that Husserl played a vital role in the development of phenomenology. It was his principles that later scholars of phenomenology of religion like Gerardus Van der Leeuw developed.

Other philosophers who applied this method to their study include, Martin Heidegger, Jean Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Karl Jasper, Marvin Faber and Paul Ricoeur. It should be noted here that they were not all uniform in their thinking.

Alfred Schutz

Another Scholar who played active role in the development of phenomenology as a methodology in research is Alfred Schutz. Born at the close of the 19th century (1899) when phenomenology as a research method was gathering momentum, he grew up and was taught by eminent scholars in the University of Vienna Austria. When he came in contact with Edmund Husserl’s work on

phenomenology, Okon (1998) explains that it became the “solid foundation for interpretive sociology”. Based on Husserl’s work, Schutz gave his study a phenomenological grounding (p.147). Alfred Schutz used phenomenological method in solving sociological issues. He saw social actions as “...action, which is oriented toward the past, present, or future behaviour of another person or persons” (qtd in Okon, 1998: 149).

In his quest for meaning Schutz created the term “the stream of consciousness” saying that “here and here only, the deepest stratum of experience that is accessible to reflection is to be found the ultimate source of the phenomena of meaning (Sinn) and understanding (Verstehen)” (qtd in Okon 149).

Having briefly given the origin and development of the term phenomenology, we shall proceed to look at the origin of the phrase “phenomenology of religion”.

Phenomenology of Religion

A careful study of the origin of the word “Phenomenology” reveals that its first proponents were not people in the field of religion. They did not actually use the method in studying any particular religion; they were scholars who were mostly in the field of philosophy. We shall therefore trace the origin of the phrase in religious terminology.

The phenomenology of religion according to *Wikipedia, the free Encyclopedia* (2007b) “concerns the experimental aspect of religion, describing religious phenomena in terms consistent with the orientation of the worshippers” (p.1). Phenomenological approach to the study of religion views religion as being made up of different components and these components are carefully studied in various religious traditions in order to gain understanding of them.

This approach owes its origin and conceptual development, to a large extent to the following scholars namely: Pierre Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye, William Brede Kristensen and Gerardus Van der Leeuw. These are the leading theorists in Phenomenology of religion.

Pierre Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye

In his work *Lehrbuch der Religionsgeschichte* translated as *Handbook of the History of Religion*, Chantepie de la Saussaye coined the phrase “phenomenology of the religion” in 1887. Here marks the origin of the phrase in religious terminology. Van der Leeuw (1956) explains that Chantepie de La Saussaye gave the “outline of the phenomenology” in his work. The work deals with two major areas namely essence and manifestation of religious phenomena. James (1995) explains that Chantepie’s phenomenology of religion is neither the history of religion nor the philosophy of religion (p.45). He further explains that the task Chantepie set to achieve in his phenomenology of religion is to prepare historical data through which philosophical analysis could be done. This could be done through “a collection, a grouping, an arrangement, and a classifying of the principal groups of religious conceptions” (p.43).

One can deduce from the above that Chantepie’s phenomenology of religion concerns the grouping of various religious phenomena from various traditions in order to discover the essence of religion, which is the meaning the religious practitioners deduce from their religion and the manifestations the worshippers experience.

Chantepie has been declared by many as the founder of this discipline and approach to the study of religion called phenomenology of religion.

William Brede Kristensen

This was another great influential figure in the field of phenomenology of religion. He was highly influenced by Chantepie’s work, which led him into a thorough research in the field of phenomenology of religion. Though he did not publish any book during his lifetime on phenomenology of religion, but

his lecture materials from the University of Leiden was posthumously, edited and published in 1960 (Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, 2007b: 1), under the title *The meaning of Religion*. James (1995) explains that Kristensen in his phenomenology “adopts many of the features of Chantepie’s grouping of religious phenomenon” (p.141-143).

From our previous explanation, Chantepie’s phenomenology is affected by the history and philosophy of religion because according to Macquarrie (1997), phenomenology of religion “often starts with the results of the historian” (p.1), but Kristensen’s is the medium whereby the philosophy and history of religion interact with and affect one another (Kristensen, 1979: 9).

James (1995) further explains that like Chantepie, Kristensen argues that phenomenology seeks the meaning of religious phenomena. To Kristensen, the meaning that he seeks to clarify is “the meaning that the religious phenomena have for the believers themselves” (p.144). Kristensen (1971) argues further that phenomenology is not enough, like Chantepie said, in grouping or classifying the phenomena of various religious traditions according to their meaning, but in the act of understanding. He explains that “phenomenology has as its objects to come as far as possible into contact with and to understand the extremely varied and divergent religious data” (p.11) He was not interested in philosophical analysis of the various phenomena but in understanding the meaning these phenomena may have on its practitioners. *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia* (2007a) explains that some of the subjects he studied concerns “mythological material (such as creation, the flood etc.) as well as human action (such as baptism, Olympic Games etc), and objects of nature and handicrafts” (p.1).

This work reveals that Kristensen’s phenomenology concerns the meaning of the phenomena of various religions and the understanding of what the practitioners of such religion allude to those phenomena.

Gerardus Van Der Leeuw

As phenomenological approach to the study of religion develops, Gerardus Van der Leeuw was another person who gave it a wider meaning in his *Phanomenologie der Religion* published in 1933. He follows Kristensen in many respects. Van der Leeuw (1956) sees understanding as a subjective aspect of phenomena, which is inherently intertwined with the objectivity of that which is manifest. Explaining his view in the second edition of his book published in 1956, Van der Leeuw correlates subjective experience, expression, and understanding with three objective levels of appearing-relative concealment, relative transparency and gradually becoming concealed or manifest-wherein the understanding of what is becoming revealed is the primordial level of appearing from which the experienced concealment and expressed transparency of appearing are derived (p.769).

Writing about Van der Leeuw, Waardenburg (1978) explains that his phenomenology of religion is based on three fundamental divisions namely: God-Man-Relation between God and man. In his words “the relation between God and Man, which was a central issue in the whole of Van der Leeuw’s, thinking, is inevitably the basis of his phenomenological work” (p.222). His phenomenology of religion centers on or is aimed “primarily ... with understanding’, and this understanding of religion was for him part of a general attitude of understanding towards reality” (Waardenburg, 1978: 224). To Van der Leeuw, rather than explanation, understanding should be the aim and purpose of the study of religion. The business of phenomenology of religion is mainly to interpret the various ways in which the sacred appears to human beings in the world, the ways in which humans understand and care for that which is revealed to them, for that which is ultimately wholly other mystery.

It can be deduced from its first proponents that the aim of phenomenology of religion is to understand the meaning or essence of religion and interpreting the various manifestations of the sacred as revealed to man.

Application of Phenomenological Method to the Study of Religion

Having examined the three first proponents of phenomenology of religion and what phenomenology of religion seeks to achieve, we shall go further to look at how this method can be applied in the academic study of religion.

We shall concentrate here on Gerardus Van der Leeuw (1963) and his view on phenomenology of religion in his *Religion in essence and manifestation: A study in phenomenology of religion*. He presents six (6) important stages through which a scholar who uses phenomenological approach to the study of religion should follow in applying the method.

Firstly, he argues that the student of religion needs to classify the religious phenomena into distinct categories such as sacrifice, sacrament, sacred space, sacred time, sacred word, festivals and myths. In this way the scholar will be able to understand the value of each of these phenomena to religious experience.

Secondly, scholars then need to interpolate the phenomena into their own lives. This means that they have to understand the religion from personal experience. Van der Leeuw (1963) by this, demands that every scholar of religion should not be an armchair scholar who does not participate in the religion he sets to study. He therefore explains, that the life examined by the scholar of religious studies needs to acquire its place in the life of the student himself who should understand it out of his own inner self.

Thirdly, Van der Leeuw borrowing from Husserl's fundamental principles of phenomenology, which are *epoche*- the suspension of value judgments, the adoption of a neutral stance and eidetic vision explains that these principles are necessary for any scholar in phenomenology of religion who wants or wishes to produce data that will be acceptable.

Fourthly, scholars need to clarify any structural relationships and make sense of the information so gathered. This will enable them move towards a holistic understanding of how the various aspects of a religion relate and function together.

In the fifth stage, Van der Leeuw (1963) explains that this procedure naturally leads to a stage at which all these activities undertaken together and simultaneously constitute genuine understanding: the chaotic and obstinate 'reality' thus becomes a manifestation, a revelation.

Sixthly the phenomenologist should not operate in isolation but his research must agree with researches of other disciplines, such as archaeology, history, philosophy and others. This method according to Van der Leeuw will help the phenomenologist to maintain a scholarly objectivity. Facts must be what phenomenology should feed on so that it will not degenerate into fantasy. When these six stages are carefully followed, the phenomenological scholar will be very close to understand the meaning or essence of any religious phenomenon studied and will also be in a better position to relate his learning to others.

Distinctive Features of Phenomenology of Religion

Waardenburg (1978) sees phenomenology of religion as a movement of thought and as a movement of research. In his words,

As a movement of thought, phenomenology tries to come to an understanding of man within a philosophical anthropology. As a movement of research, Phenomenology tries to classify specific sets of phenomena including religious phenomenon in such a way that it does justice to their expressed meanings... A meaning is an explicit or implicit connection, which is made between different phenomena, thus assembling them into meaningful, structures (p.91-92).

Having this view as expressed by Waardenburg in mind we shall proceed to present the various distinctive features of phenomenological approach to the study of religion.

Moreau (2001:248-259), has expressed various ideas which we will like to adopt in this paper on phenomenology of religion.

The first is that phenomenology of religion is descriptively oriented. This means that evaluative judgments are not their concern but they seek "accurate and appropriate descriptions and

interpretations of religious phenomena” (Moreau 2001: 249). These include rituals, symbols, prayers, ceremonies, theology (written or oral), sacred persons, art, creeds and other religious exercises, whether corporate or private.

Another feature of phenomenology of religion is that it does not have as a goal to explain the phenomena it describes. The phenomenologists condemn the idea of trying to discover universal laws, which can be used to predict future behaviour. Their desire is not to find an explanation for a problem but to achieve an adequate understanding of the very problems.

The third feature of phenomenological study of religion is comparative in a limited sense. Since phenomenology emphasizes the importance of data, it becomes relevant that the more data incorporated into the work the more potential significance the study will be (Moreau, 2001: 250). Though meaning may best be found in data by using comparative methods, yet the phenomenologist does not seek to list or describe similar practice across adverse religious traditions for the purpose of rating them from best to worst.

Fourthly, the phenomenologist of religion avoids reductionism. Reductionism is a method whereby scholars try to reduce and even trivialize religious phenomena to purely sociological, psychological, anthropological, economic, or environmental terms. Such reductions according to Moreau (2001) “ignore the complexity of the human experience, impose social values on transcendental issues, and ignore the unique intentionality of the religious participant. Phenomenologists do not seek a bird’s eye view, but, ... a worm’s eye view” (p. 225).

The fifth distinctive feature of phenomenology of religion is that it suspends questions of truth for the sake of developing insights into the essence of religious experience. The phenomenologist of religion is a participant observer whose aim is to develop a genuine empathic understanding of the experiences of the worshippers and so gain first hand information. They do not “follow the metaphor of the detached, scientific observer. A more appropriate metaphor is that of an actor, who requires an intimate, empathic knowledge of the part being portrayed for a successful production” (Moreau, 2001: 256).

Another distinctive feature is the development of insight into the essential structures and meanings of religious experience. This is regarded as the ultimate goal of phenomenology of religion (Moreau, 2001: 257). It opposes the acceptance of unobservable matters and grand systems erected in speculative thinking. This means that it goes beyond the sphere of philosophy to reality and actuality. It opposes naturalism popularly called objectivism and positivism, which is the worldview growing from modern natural science and technology that has been spreading from Northern Europe since the age of learning referred to as Renaissance. Phenomenologists justify cognition, evaluation, and action, which is awareness of a matter itself as disclosed in the most clear, distinct, and adequate way for something of its kind. They also tend to believe that not only objects in the natural and cultural worlds, but also ideal objects, such as numbers and even conscious life itself can be made evident and thus known.

Finally, phenomenologists recognize the role of descriptions in universal, apriori, or “eidetic” that is revelation terms as prior to explanation by means of causes, purposes, or grounds.

The above features distinctly show that phenomenology of religion is a discipline which can help students of religious studies understand the particular religion he/she seeks to study.

A Critique of Phenomenology of Religion

It must be noted that irrespective of how influential and reasonable this method of study is, there are several areas in which it faces difficult questions as it tries to understand the essence of religious experience and manifestations.

The first area that deserves questioning is in its descriptive role. Phenomenology of religion’s claims that it is purely descriptive can be seen as almost impossible in the light of human conditions and constrains. Every person including phenomenologists, has what might sometimes be termed hidden agendas driving data, method of analysis, and presentation of findings. Phenomenologists have been seen in many literatures as crossing the boundary from description to evaluation. From all indications

crossing such boundaries is a necessary means of showing what it means to be culturally and historically a part of human being with religious identity. So when phenomenology claims to be purely descriptive methodology is totally unacceptable.

Another area that phenomenology of religion has come under attack is in the area of trying to look at “religious events as though they were a set of slides rather than a living video rooted in an historical context” (Moreau, 2001: 257). Phenomenology tends to be treating phenomena in isolation of history as if history is not necessary in determining how relevant a particular phenomenon is for religious practitioners. Most times phenomenology lacks the ability to contextualise various religious phenomena so studied.

Furthermore, phenomenologist sees vision or revelation as necessary in its intuition. This is problematic in that one cannot be able to determine which eidetic-revelation or vision is regarded as true and acceptable. They also use the terms 'objectivity' and 'intuition', which is contradictory. When one uses intuitive insights in drawing a data and yet wants to be objective throws the whole process into shamble because if one is to verify an intuitive data, on what grounds will it be based.

Another most dangerous issue in phenomenology of religion is that it leads to many conversions to the religion the scholar is studying because of his empathy and trying to have the experience of the religion studied. To Christians, for example this full participation in religious practices such as some rituals may be very difficult and so may limit empathy and phenomenological study.

Phenomenology of religion does not accept positivist's reductions of religion. This has in most cases reduced religion, “if not to ‘non-religion’ then, at least either to a purely religious experience or to a purely religious idea” (Waardenburg, 1978: 128).

Irrespective of these criticisms about this methodological approach to the study of religion it still remains one of the most influential today in the field of academic study of religion.

Conclusion

In this paper we have submitted that phenomenology of religion is the approach to the study of religion which considers the essence, that is, the meaning and the manifestations of religious phenomena. It looks at the religious practitioner and the meaning he/she derives from his experience in that religion.

We have also given a brief historical origin of this approach to the study of religion, which started with the work of Pierre Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye. This work has also shown the views of William Brede Kristensen and that of Gerardus van der Leeuw in phenomenology of religion. We have examined the way in which phenomenological approach can be applied in the study of religion, which among others include the classification of religious phenomena from various religious traditions.

The various distinctive features of this method have also been examined. In conclusion, we can say that phenomenological approach is necessary in the study of religions because of its attempt to understand religion in terms of essence and manifestations. Generally speaking, it can be proven that the interpretation of religious data is closely connected with the concept of religion peculiar to the individual scholar.

This means that the responsibility of the phenomenologist is to analyze and investigate into the concept of religion wherever it occurs. We can therefore agree with Waardenburg (1978) that:

Indeed, phenomenology of religion may testify to a pre-dilection for metaphysical questions and religion as essential reality. It is essentially directed, however, to the human context, the human substance of reality. Behind the intentions, it is with his fellow-beings, both past and present that the student seeks to communicate (p.137).

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